

Contributed

EASTER IN THE GREEK CHURCH.

By Mrs. I. M. Ritner.

There is, perhaps, no ecclesiastical body on the church which abounds more in "Feasts," "Fasts," or "Saints Days," than does the Greek (Eastern) or The Orthodox Church, as they, the Greeks, are pleased to term it. Almost every day in the year is a "Holy-day," from some cause or other and such are termed the "Minor" and "Greater Festivals." Of these there are eighty-five, all of which are celebrated with more or less pomp, splendor, ceremony, feasting or prayer, as the occasion seems to demand. Under the influence of a soft, balmy climate, nature putting on spring attire in February, and never donning her richly variegated carpet of wild flowers until in December, with a belief enervated by the climate, yet bearing naturally an energy and vim, unusual under such climatical influences, it is no wonder they are easily tempted to indulge in this festal occasion, or that they enter into them with great avidity.

Among the most celebrated of their feasts is Easter, with its carnival, fast and Easter rejoicings. The carnival, or as the Greeks say, "apokreas," means, literally, "from meat," and the term is applied to the "two weeks," embracing three Sabbath days, immediately preceding the forty days' fast and Lent.

But unlike the quiet, subdued, religious preparation, seemingly so very fit for the "Lenten Season," this "apokreas" in Greece is a season of riotous living; it is as though they tried to take their fill of folly and food, before the days of fasting and prayer begin. The streets are filled all day with masqueraders decked, some in gorgeous attire, others in rags and tatters, some in the fresh skin of hogs, and many so filled with wine that the inner, as well as the outer, man seems to partake of this nature. Some ride on donkeys or mules, a few in carriages, but most are on foot; some engage in reveling, shouts and laughter, and the most terrific music from inharmonious instruments and uncultivated voices rends the air, while ever and anon a group, ridiculously solemn in their sobriety and strikingly in contrast with their grotesque appearance, parade with slow and measured tread this way of folly.

At night bonfires are kindled along the principal streets, surrounded by groups of men and boys in masquerade costume, the wine shops open with music, which is torture to a cultivated ear, but serves to attract a crowd, and the reveling is kept up until 5 a. m., when a symposium is indulged in, and the semi-intoxicated participants sleep a few hours, only to refresh themselves sufficiently to repeat the folly of the previous day. Those taking part in these festivities are largely men and boys, but young women often go out in masquerade attire, generally in carriages during the day. The grand winding up is on the Sabbath day immediately preceding the "fast." On that day all the possible

Monday issues in "Great Fast" of The Greek Orthodox Church, but the revelry does not cease. On the evening of that day immense crowds throng the fields and plains surrounding Athens, especially the old col-

umns of Jupiter Olympus, the Acropolis, the Temple of Theseus, and other places of classic interest. Here in groups they eat their first frugal meal, consisting of bread and olives, bread and onions, or bread and grapes. The "staff of life" is always there, and the condiment is added as taste or means dictate, sometimes only a little green lettuce or cucumber without salt.

They sit about in groups, always in families, that is, the father, mother, and daughters remain together, the young men forming separate companies, roam over the fields and pluck the lovely wild flowers, or gather on the hill-tops and dance to the music of a primitive but flute-like instrument.

This "Romaic" dance is entirely unlike anything known in our land, but is probably much more akin to the old "Pyrrhic" or war dance. It is performed exclusively by men, five or six generally taking part, holding each other by one hand and forming a sort of semi-circle. The motion is graceful, and for the most part slow and stately, though occasionally it becomes rapid and even violent. In this way the hours of the evening are spent, and as the shadows lengthen and twilight approaches, all return to their homes, and the quiet of Lent succeeds to the noise and confusion of the "Carnival."

During Lent the bells on the churches toll every morning, our Greek servant said, "for the Death of Christ," and there are some unusual and additional exercises each day. On Thursday preceding Easter Sunday begins a special service. On that evening "All of the Twelve Gospels" are read in each of the churches, which, being interpreted, means that all relating to the death of Christ in the four Gospels is arranged in twelve lessons, called the "Twelve Evangeleans," which are read that night.

On the evening of Good Friday the churches were thrown open, and we, as Americans, were very much interested in going from one to another. In each one there was a picture of the Savior in death, as he was taken from the cross, some larger, and some smaller.

This was placed in, or rather on, a box, perhaps five by three or four, all being of the same size, but all made to represent a coffin or bier, on which the picture was laid, and covered usually with very thin lace or muslin, and the whole very elaborately ornamented, and with handles by which it could be carried. A Bible, embossed with silver and gold pictures, was laid near the foot of the picture. This and the picture itself was kissed many times by the worshippers, as they bent over it making the sign of the cross. The book was placed on a table with ornamental cloth hanging around. All was decorated with flowers, and candles were burning at the head and foot. Many persons, men, women and children, were coming and going at the different churches, and the object seemed to be to worship this picture.

Just outside the door of every church, and also within the church, were tables filled with wax tapers of various sizes, for sale and being sold all the time. Then, too, there were large baskets of flowers which the priests were selling in small bunches. We could not help thinking that the house of God seemed literally a "House of